

Legendary conductor Philip T. Ventre to  
celebrate 50 years with Wallingford  
Symphony Orchestra







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Philip Ventre, co-founder of the Wallingford Symphony Orchestra, poses for a photo at the Record-Journal in Meriden, Dec. 20, 2023. Ventre is celebrating 50 years with the Wallingford Symphony Orchestra. Dave Zajac, Record-Journal

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**By Nicole Zappone, Record-Journal staff**

WALLINGFORD — Conductor Philip T. Ventre will celebrate 50 years as a founding member of the Wallingford Symphony Orchestra in 2024.

Ventre, along with the late Terence Netter, founded the WSO in 1974. As the music director and teacher at Choate Rosemary Hall, Ventre wanted to honor the nation's bicentennial by creating a symphony orchestra featuring some of the state's finest musicians, private music teachers, college students, and rising amateur musicians.

Together, Ventre and Netter brought their idea to the Wallingford Bicentennial Commission, and its Horizons Committee endorsed the orchestra's first concert.

"We proposed that Wallingford should have a symphony orchestra," Ventre said.

Ventre noted that people on the commission said they didn't want another jazz band. After explaining that it wasn't another jazz band and what their intentions were, Ventre said they were approved.

"From 1974 to 1976, the Bicentennial Commission and Choate Rosemary Hall supported the orchestra," Ventre said. "From 1976 to 1978, Choate School and the Town of Wallingford supported the orchestra."

In 1978, the WSO became incorporated as an all-professional orchestra and a nonprofit organization.

The symphony's first concert was in December 1974 at the Paul Mellon Arts Center at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford.

Professional musicians from the New Haven and Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Connecticut-based private music teachers, and college and high school musicians were brought together under the direction of Ventre.

John Shulga, a local businessman and community leader, was the first president of the Board of Directors.

Ventre's musical family

Ventre, 80, comes from a very rich musical heritage, and he's proud of it.

"My father had five brothers who were all musicians," he said.

Ventre added that his Uncle William was a band director for a company that toured throughout Europe.

Frank Ventre, Ventre's Uncle, was a Broadway composer and arranger.

A third uncle, Johnny, was a trumpet player, Ventre said.

"He was my inspiration as I played trumpet as a child and throughout college," Ventre said. "Uncle Johnny played in many of the Broadway theaters."

Ventre's mother was a pianist, organist, a soprano and a choral conductor, along with being a private teacher. His father played guitar and banjo at Radio City Music Hall for many years, then toured with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. The orchestra was one of the most popular jazz groups in the 1920s.

The beginning of the WSO

Nikolai Sikorsky, son of helicopter inventor Igor Sikorsky, was WSO's first lead violinist. And Jeanne Switzer, a Wallingford music teacher who studied with Dr. [Shinichi Suzuki](#) in Japan, brought Suzuki's method of violin instruction to the United States. Following that, Switzer played with the WSO for a number of years.

The WSO has performed in concert with many celebrated artists, including pianist and orchestra conductor Jeffrey Kahane, violinist Stephanie Chase and Eroica Trio (piano), along with opera singers Maria Spacagna and Jerry Hadley, American Ballet Theatre prima ballerina Julie Kent, *The Witkowski Piano Duo*, and jazz legend *Dave Brubeck*.

*Since the WSO's inception in 1974, Ventre has been the music director of Symphony Under the Stars, presenting free outdoor concerts, and music director of the Johanna Fishbein Memorial Children's Concerts, in which 1,400 children perform.*

*Ventre has been welcomed on many other stages.*

*He has conducted the Connecticut Opera, Connecticut Ballet and New Haven Ballet, and the University of Connecticut Orchestra.*

*As a guest, Ventre has conducted alongside the Vivaldi Concertante Orchestra of London, the Kammerorchester Arpeggione of Zurich, the Longwood Symphony Orchestra (Massachusetts), the Fort Collins Symphony (Colorado), the Nashua Symphony Orchestra (New Hampshire), and the Northern Ballet (New Hampshire).*

*Since 1998, Ventre has been a frequent guest conductor in the People's Republic of China, conducting the Xiamen Philharmonic, Tianjin Symphony, Guangxi Province Orchestra, Xi'an Symphony, and the Shaanxi Philharmonic Orchestra.*

### *About Phil Ventre*

*Ventre attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where he received a bachelor's degree in music education and a master's degree in trumpet and music history.*

*During his time in college, Ventre studied with the four members of the Boston Symphony trumpet section.*

*One of Ventre's memories in college was as an usher at the Boston Symphony. It was one particular Friday in November 1963 that Ventre will never forget.*

*"Just before the concert began, the symphony announced that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated," Ventre said. "The orchestra stayed on stage, and the manager came on stage and told the audience the news."*

*Ventre noted that people started crying, screaming and running out of the hall.*

*"Our country is being invaded, and they assassinated our president," Ventre said he heard from the manager.*

*Ventre said that the orchestra stayed on the stage and played the second movement from Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, called "Eroica," which translates to "Hero." This was played in honor of John F. Kennedy.*

### *Ventre gets recruited by Choate Rosemary Hall*

*Choate Rosemary Hall reached out to Ventre, wanting him to teach at the school. Ventre, over time, became the head of instrumental music and worked there 50 years. He retired in 2020.*

*"I shall cherish for a lifetime the memories of their sincere dedication to achieving their individual level of artistic excellence," Ventre said of his students to The Choate News upon his retirement. "These gifted and sincere young scholar musicians have bonded together to create and to nurture a truly inspirational musical family."*

*During the stint at Choate, Ventre conducted the Choate Rosemary Hall Orchestra and Jazz Ensemble, taught six music history courses, and has been nominated three times for a Grammy Music Educator Award. He has also been selected as a U.S. Presidential Scholar Teacher of Recognition.*

*He has toured with the CRHO in 12 European countries, which included China four times. He's been to the Great Wall four times and performed in historic concert halls and cathedrals such*

*as the Madeleine Cathedral (Salt Lake City, Utah), the Salzburg (Austria) Cathedral, the Barcelona Cathedral and the Shanghai Conservatory.*

*In addition, the CRHO has performed as invited guests in Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Guggenheim Museum, Yale University's Woolsey Hall, and the Connecticut Music Educators All-State Conventions.*

*In December 2009, the CRHO was presented with the honor of performing at the White House.*

### *Concert season for WSO*

*The season for WSO typically begins in October with a Halloween concert that is enhanced by local singers and choirs.*

*The spring concert reaches out to Wallingford students through the Uria and Johanna Manfreda Fishbein Children's Concert Series, a program that started in 1980 and was given its current name in 1998.*

*During the summer, the WSO performs free outdoor concerts on the St. John Chapel lawn to celebrate the Fourth of July. At this concert, the audience will hear anything from Boston Pops classics to Broadway and Hollywood-themed music.*

*Concerts typically occur at Choate's Ann and George Colony Hall at 333 Christian St. in Wallingford.*

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